

totally unharmed) as the basic Tasthan design: stretch of corridor, peristyle hall, corridor, burial chamber.

Simple. Direct. Two hundred metres, 15, another hundred, then the ten-metre circular chamber: the classic Tasthan biocromlech. Simple. Linear. Very deadly.

For there would be traps, illusions, sensory and neural tricks. Standing there, Beni ran the latest figures again, unchanged, of course, since the last postings, but you never knew when new data might be collated and added – the town’s comp systems were constantly at it. Outright death with bodies recovered still stayed at 12% of annual penalties, selective maiming and stigma – the “souvenirs,” 14% (but at least you returned), failure to return at all was still 63% (up 2% on last year’s average – things did change), failure to enter the tomb but believing so, 11%.

Beni cleared that, studied the simplified plan again – spinal access corridor (axial, porcelain-smooth), vertebrate peristyle (handsomely corbelled, and otherwise featureless but for the 14 columns, seven to a side, and the intaglio relief on each of the back walls), more corridor, finally the central tholos, the skull chamber: unavoidable analogy and another of Ramirez’s terms, just as he had been the one to revive the old names: tholoi, tumuli, henge megaliths, cromlechs, dolmens, going through the old databases, going on about Celts, Myceneans, Etruscans, whoever they were, much older peoples than the Tastans.

Beni flicked random selections, chance plan superimpositions, hoping to trick any tomb override. The defences were clever but they were old.

No change. The classic plan remained. No *apparent* change.

What would Ramirez do now?, Beni wondered again, again, again, putting it off, avoiding. And, finding that he was doing so, made himself take the first step, found the others easier, was soon leaving the square of warm daylight far behind. His cap-light struck out ahead, illuminating the corridor, the smooth and off-white walls; his footsteps echoed off the cool ceramic, carrying him into night, into the underworld of the vast low funerary hill.

“Dormeuse?” he called. “You have company, Dormeuse!” Called it over and over, as Ramirez suggested he do.

“Not so loud,” a voice finally said, and a host flashed on beside him, a startling mummiform of light, gaining resolution, female distinction. “I’m trying to sleep.”

She was lovely, as perfectly formed, idealized, as Ramirez had said she would be, the tall glowing enantios intercept of an auburn-haired woman in middle-age or backtracked to about 45, with an open, pretty if not wholly beautiful face and eyes like blackest glass, but a gentle gaze all the same, with nothing like the cold arrogant manner of intercepts the grim-faced “souvenired” veterans back in town had told him about.

Beni glanced down at his scanner, glad to see the basic plan confirmed, even if not to be trusted, never to be trusted, and kept on walking. The intercept

“walked” with him, fully formed now, smiling like a curious servant, which is exactly what she was. It was. She.

“Someone has been talking to you,” she said. “You’re too confident.”

“But new to this all the same. I need as much help as I can get.”

“I have much more experience. Listen. Turn round now. I’ll let you go. Promise.”

Beni smiled. Even without the advice he’d been given, he would have found the offer unacceptable, though it actually did happen now and then. Sometimes did. Justified the old saying that even the tombs had a bad day now and then.

“Don’t believe you. Won’t do it. Thanks.”

The display flickered but held, his reader sorting, sorting, seeking any other valid plan, if only as a split-second glimpse.

“Last chance,” she said. “Keep going and I’ll have you.”

“You probably already do,” Beni said, heart pounding, afraid and exhilarated, entranced by the image, forcing himself to talk down at his scanner display, avoiding the eyes. “The Stones’ll have me if they don’t already.”

“Do you know what souvenir I have planned for you?”

“Please, Dormeuse. Do what you must, but enough of these threats.”

And sure enough, the intercept changed tack.

“You see no ethical problem with this, do you?”

Beni smiled at the shift, gave the rote answer. “There has never been a time where one age and culture hasn’t plundered the remains of another.”

“But why? There’s no wealth here. Nothing you can use. No gold, jewels or funerary possessions. Forget the rumours. Not enough precious materials in the circuitry and hardware. Certainly nothing accessible to you. No meaningful tech knowledge.”

“I know.”

“So why? Why do you use the term ‘tomb-robbers’ if...?”

“I prefer the ‘reasonable’ to the ‘threat’ mode, but could you bring on the next phase? I do need to concentrate.”

The phantom hovered, seemed to walk. “Such an arrogant young man. Someone has been talking to you. But I’d really like to know.”

Arrogant? Beni stared down at the display and considered it. Overconfident perhaps. Optimistic. Determined to be among the best. But hardly arrogant. “What have others said? Ramirez managed it. What did he say?”

“He was courteous but wouldn’t talk to me as freely as you seem prepared to. He probably suspected a voice trap, some trance dislocation induced by word pattern, tone and timbre. You don’t seem to fear that.”

“There were others though, Dormeuse.” The maimed ones, he didn’t add. Barlow, Deckley, Kylow, Soont, the others, all skilled men and women, all souvenired. “What did they say?”

“Again, not too much,” the phantom answered. “Concentration does that, I suppose. And fear. I

remember my wife being outraged when she read this story, and rightly so – the marriage described here, like all those that follow it, has no basis in my own life. Yet from what forgotten experience stems this obsessive and often repeated image of the predatory woman and the husband retreating into his own mind?

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“Billennium” (November 1961)

“Billennium” was the favourite story of the late Ted Carnell, the editor of *New Worlds* who published more than half the stories in this book and made possible a new kind of science fiction – the New Wave. By the time he published “Billennium” in 1961 the vague murmurings of discontent from the old-guard readers that had greeted my short stories over the previous four years suddenly broke into outright hostility. Although this was the year of Gagarin’s first orbital flight, sales of traditional science fiction were declining everywhere, and the emergence of a new kind of sf threatened the security of the ghetto.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“The Gentle Assassin”

(December 1961)

For me, time is the ultimate mystery, stranger and more pitiless than the fears aroused in us by our sexual drive or the image of our own death. Its apparently linear flux, the almost Renaissance perspective which it seems to confer on our lives, finally reveals itself to be part of an immense curvilinear system around which we revolve like blind drivers thrown onto a freeway, constantly passing and repassing the points in space we have traversed an infinite number of times before. On this indistinct tracery our most profound desires and feelings take on the flickering brilliance of fireflies.

– From *Le livre d’or de la science-fiction: J. G. Ballard* (1980; back-translated from Robert Louit’s French by DP)

“The Insane Ones” (January 1962)

“The Insane Ones” was one of the first stories I sold to the American magazines. Although most people assume that science fiction, like its main inspiration – science itself – is dedicated to change and experiment, American science fiction in general and its magazines in particular have always been deeply conservative, nervous of anything outside their rigid conventions. Appropriately, perhaps, “The Insane Ones” takes a look at fanaticism. Is the deranged assassin who murders a tyrant the only sane

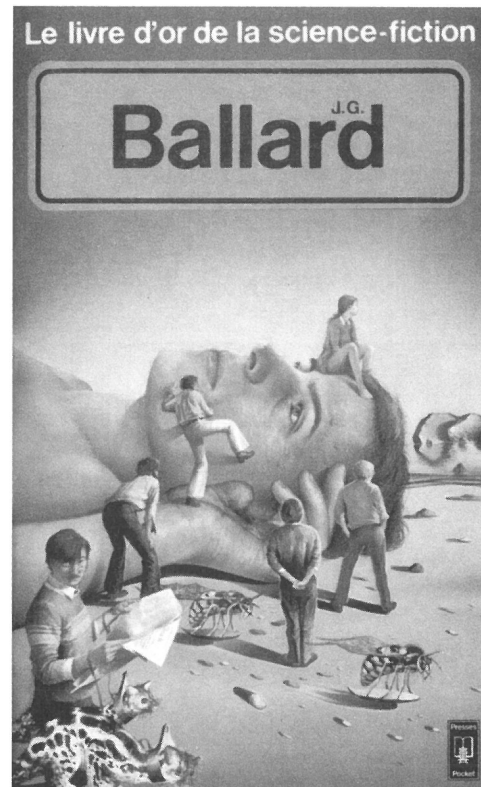
man in his society? Do we need the insane to perform justifiable and necessary acts we are too rational to commit?

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

The Wind from Nowhere

(January 1962; originally serialized as “Storm-Wind,” September-October 1961)

The cataclysmic story is particularly interesting because it shows how even a minor variation in one of the physical constants of the environment



can make life totally untenable – a corollary of the biological rule that the more specialized the organism the narrower the margin of safety.

Perhaps because of their climate, English writers seem to have a virtual monopoly of the genre, one or two of the contemporary ones producing almost nothing else. Analysing the author’s hidden motives is one of the quieter pleasures of reading – and writing – science fiction, and from the deluge in the Babylonian zodiac myth of Gilgamesh, from which come Noah and the sign of Aquarius, all the way down to *The War of the Worlds*, the real significance of the cataclysmic story is obviously to be found elsewhere. “Storm-Wind” is no exception, and anyone wondering why I’ve chosen to destroy London quite so thoroughly should try living there for ten years. I’m only sorry that I couldn’t call it *Gone With the Wind*.

– From “J. G. Ballard, Shepperton, Middx.” (*New Worlds* no. 111, October 1961)

“The Garden of Time”

(February 1962)

Time is one of the great themes of all science fiction, and one that has dominated most of my own writing. With the exception of the time machine itself, it is one of the few subjects that requires no gadgetry, and the best time stories, those by Ray Bradbury or Richard Matheson, are as simple and mysterious as sundials.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“Thirteen to Centaurus”

(April 1962)

By 1962 the first manned space-flights had taken place and it was clear that within a few years men would land on the Moon, and begin the first of the journeys that will carry us during the next few centuries to all the planets of the solar system. What interested me at the time, but seemed to be ignored by the NASA planners, was to what extent the experience of total confinement and self-immersion in a spacecraft would play into the hands of unexpected psychological impulses. Interestingly, in the last few years we have seen a glimpse of the hidden effects of space travel in the subsequent lives of many of the Apollo astronauts.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“The Cage of Sand” (June 1962)

Science-fiction writers in recent years have usually disclaimed the gift of prophecy, at the same time showing a quiet pride when their predictions come true. “The Cage of Sand” was written a year after

Gagarin’s first flight and in the hey-day of Cape Canaveral, when hundreds of square miles of swamp and sand-dune were turned into the world’s newest and greatest complex of communications and space technology. Even before the Space Age had begun I had a hunch it would be short-lived – basically because NASA and the Russians had left the imagination out of space, one mistake the sf writers never made. By the early 70s my prophecy bore fruit. The Space Age is virtually over. Large tracts of Cape Kennedy are now rusting and abandoned, the launch pads are deserted, for-sale signs hang over the empty supermarkets and motels. But there is still magic to be found there.

– From *The Best of J. G. Ballard* (1977)

“The Singing Statues” (July 1962)

This story belongs to the Vermilion Sands cycle. Vermilion Sands: a holi-